

Aesthetic Critiques (expanded edition):

An Anthology of Essays by

Arnold Berleant

1. Re-thinking Aesthetics

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6F47GT55>

Filozofski vestnik, XX (2/1999 - XIV ICA), Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of Aesthetics "Aesthetics as Philosophy" (Ljubljana, Slovenia), pp. 25-33.

ABSTRACT

I want to propose a radical re-examination of the foundations of modern aesthetics. This kind of exploration is at the same time a profoundly philosophical act, for philosophical premises lie at the base of modern aesthetics. Exploring these premises, indeed challenging them, can lead us to a new basis for aesthetics derived from aesthetic inquiry itself and not as the afterthought of a philosophical tradition whose origins were quite independent of the aesthetic domain. Conversely, re-thinking aesthetics may suggest new ways of doing philosophy.

2. Questioning Aesthetics

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6N00ZT1V>

Given at the Symposium, "Questioning Aesthetics," at RISD (2016).

ABSTRACT

When I first reflected on the title of this symposium, I thought it could be read as an invitation to critique the academic practice of aesthetics as a scholarly discipline, to identify its limitations, its subservience to fashionable academic ideologies, its alienation from much of what was (and is) being done by artists of all sorts and traditions, past as well as present. But there is another meaning, an adjectival meaning, in questioning aesthetics. It is to consider aesthetics as an inquiry that questions by its very nature, a questioning-aesthetics, aesthetics as a distinctive kind of questioning: aesthetic questioning. Here its scope is boundless, and aesthetics quickly becomes a critique of the human world, of its institutions, its practices, its justices and injustices, its sense of things on the basis of the perceptual conditions they inhabit and promote. What might such a critique reveal? Where might it lead if aesthetics became the questioner? What is an aesthetics that questions?

3. Beyond Disinterestedness

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M69C6S12X>

The British Journal of Aesthetics, 34/3 (July 1994).

ABSTRACT

The notion of disinterestedness became, during the eighteenth century, the central term in modern aesthetics. Developments in the arts since that time, however, have led to its loss of relevance, although it has continued its preeminence in theory. While rejecting disinterestedness and its kindred concepts of contemplation, distance, and universality, their continuing insights lie in perceptual directness and receptivity and in focused attention. These can be retained in an aesthetics of engagement that reflects the collaboration with artist and art object that is central in appreciation.

4. An Exchange on Disinterestedness DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6FT8DJ6H>
With Ronald Hepburn, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, I (2003).

ABSTRACT

The idea of aesthetic disinterestedness has been a central concept in aesthetics since the late eighteenth century. This exchange offers a contemporary reconsideration of disinterestedness from different sides of the question.

5. The Social Evaluation of Art DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/gd8h-y966>
Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment, Theme and Variations on Art and Culture*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 186-199. ISBN: 978-0754650775

ABSTRACT

How can art and artist be both autonomous and inseparable from the network of social processes? Aren't these incompatible conditions? Not exactly, for while the arts are an integral part of the social order, their social value, I want to argue, rests on the preservation of artistic freedom. Under such a condition the arts not only make their unique contribution and demonstrate their distinctive value, but this curious circumstance provides a basis on which to evaluate the individual work of art. We arrive, then, at an unanticipated consequence: The more completely art is encouraged to pursue its own course, to follow its inherent direction, the more successfully will the arts be able to make their distinctive contribution to social life. The rest of this chapter is an elaboration and defense of that claim.

6. Deconstructing Disney World DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6RR1PM46>
The Aesthetics of Human Environments, edited by Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview, 2007), pp. 139-149.

ABSTRACT

It might seem strange to propose an aesthetic consideration of the theme park, that artificial bloom in the garden of popular culture. The aesthetic is often considered a minority interest in the modern world, yet it offers a distinctive perspective, even on an activity that has mass appeal, and can provide insights that would otherwise remain undiscovered. Aesthetic description and interpretation can illuminate the theme park in many directions: as architecture, design, theater, landscape architecture, environment. I shall choose the last of these, environment.

7. The Human Touch and the Beauty of Nature DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6VH5CH83>
Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

ABSTRACT

The human presence is unavoidable, not only in the natural world but on the very occasion of beauty. There is little or nothing on this planet that has not been influenced by human action. Not only have people radically altered the earth's surface, but human practices have affected the atmosphere, the seas, the very climate. Moreover, the

awareness of beauty and the aesthetic satisfaction this affords are grounded in perceptual experience, a human occurrence. Our recognition and participation are essential in recognizing beauty's presence and indeed for its very possibility. Nature untouched, then, is a state found exclusively in prehuman history and about which we can only conjecture. It exists now merely as a speculative idea, for a person's awareness is the filter through which both nature's meanings and its beauties are necessarily apprehended. The title of this chapter is therefore not a conflict of opposites but somewhat ironic, since nature, as we know it, and human action, as we have just seen, are not different realms but the same. They are cited as the subject of my discussion and not as an implied contrast.

8. Some Questions for Ecological Aesthetics DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6GP24>
Environmental Philosophy (Spring 2016), 123-135.

ABSTRACT

Ecology has become a popular conceptual model in numerous fields of inquiry and it seems especially appropriate for environmental philosophy. Apart from its literal employment in biology, ecology has served as a useful metaphor that captures the interdependence of factors in a field of research. At the same time as ecology is suggestive, it cannot be followed literally or blindly. This paper considers the appropriateness of the uses to which ecology has been put in some recent discussions of architectural and environmental aesthetics, and develops a critique of the differing ecological aesthetics of Jusuck Koh and Xiangzhan Cheng.

9. The Subversion of Beauty DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M64B2X47X>
Chinese translation by Zhao Yu, *South China Academics* (University of Macau), 2018.

ABSTRACT

We can see how an aesthetic analysis of the mechanisms of mass culture can reveal many of the hidden ways in which sensibility is appropriated and controlled. It may not be too far-fetched to recall Aristotle's definition of a slave as a living tool. How else should we think of a person whose sensibility has been so taken over that one's very perception of the world is controlled by others. This is more than physical domination, more than thought control; it is control over the very substance of experience. Would it be too strong to call this total enslavement? Through such an analysis as this essay suggests, aesthetics is empowered to become an instrument of emancipation.

10. Negative Aesthetics and Everyday Life DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6CJ87K6H>
Aesthetic Pathways, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 75-91.

ABSTRACT

The discipline of aesthetics is generally associated with art, and the word 'aesthetics' is often taken to connote art that is valued as good or great. What that value is and how to assess it are central questions for aesthetic theory. Despite common usage, however, the word 'aesthetic' is not synonymous with 'beauty' and has applications far wider than to art alone. The etymology of 'aesthetic' emphasizes its central meaning of sense

perception, and I use the word emphasizing that core meaning. However, sensory experience, and hence aesthetic experience, is not always positive, and when it is offensive, distressing, or has harmful or damaging consequences, the aesthetic leads us to the realm of the negative. In this essay I want to identify some of the conditions when aesthetic value is present but in unsatisfying, painful, perverse, or even destructive ways. I shall focus on the human environment and shows how the aesthetic fuses with the moral. We can give a name to sensory experience that has no clear positive value, the underside of beauty, so to say, and call it negative aesthetics.

11. Perceptual Politics

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/q2td-pg12>

Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), pp. 274-306. ISBN: 978-1845401733

ABSTRACT

Moved by the pervasiveness and insistence of political forces in social life, many scholars have been drawn increasingly to recognize the strands of the aesthetic that are woven into its texture. They have gone beyond dealing with the ways that the arts are used in political propaganda and for arousing patriotic feeling. The aesthetic has come to be recognized as a perceptual domain of considerable power and influence, and some analysts have assigned it a crucial place in political theory. Making the aesthetic central in political theory may be surprising, for two such dissimilar domains of thought and experience might seem, at first, difficult to reconcile. Yet the association of aesthetics with politics has been made, and it will be illuminating to look at some applications that assign the aesthetic dimension a critical place in social and political thought. Let me then trace some of the appeals to the aesthetic in founding political theory, first considering Friedrich Schiller before moving into contemporary proposals.

12. The Aesthetics of Politics

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/7t9e-hw54>

Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World (Imprint Academic, 2010), pp. 213-224. ISBN: 978-1845401733

ABSTRACT

Illuminating the pervasiveness and importance of the aesthetic presence was the task I undertook in my recent book, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, and this essay develops the final chapter in that book. What I want to do here is carry that process still further, most particularly into the regions of political theory. For the energies of the artistic process invariably engage the social world, and the implications of artistic practice and aesthetic experience are necessarily political. Let me try to show how this is so.

13. Art, Terrorism, and the Negative Sublime DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6VQ2S91X>
Arts and Terror ed. V. L. Marchenkov (Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2014), pp. 1-15.

ABSTRACT

It has become increasingly clear that the arts, and the aesthetic, more generally, occupy no hallowed ground but live on the everyday earth of our lives. Recognition is growing that the aesthetic is a pervasive dimension of the objects and activities of daily life. The range of such occasions is limitless, and this adds to the significance of the aesthetics of the everyday. Such an expansion of the aesthetic has important consequences. Perhaps the most striking is need to acknowledge that the range of aesthetic experience includes more than the appreciative engagement with art and nature. But not only does the aesthetic extend to the uncustomary; it encompasses the full range of human normative experience. Experiences of the aesthetic include not only the elevated and noble but the reprehensible, degrading, and destructive. This is so not as the result of an arbitrary decision to include them but from actual experience and practice. The aesthetic offers a full and direct grasp of the human world. That it may include violence and depravity is not the fault of aesthetics but of that world.

14. Reflections on the Aesthetics of Violence DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/aph9-1969>
Contemporary Aesthetics, guest editor Emmanouil Aretoulakis, Special Volume 7 (2019, forthcoming). <https://www.contempaesthetics.org>

ABSTRACT

Violence has long been a factor in human life and has been widely depicted in the arts. This essay explores how the artistic and appreciative responses to violence have been practiced, understood, and valued. It emphasizes the difference between the aesthetics of distant, disinterested appreciation and the engaged appreciative experience of violence in the arts, and insists on the relevance of their behavioral and ethical implications.